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### The Civil War: Told through Photography and Poetry

The American Civil War was one of, if not the single greatest defining moment in United States history. It forever altered and changed the fate of our nation, and created it into the free state that it is today. It was through the bloodshed of hundreds of thousands of men that in turn freed four million enslaved African Americans. Needless to say, the Civil War is a very important piece of American history. In a time that contained none of the technological advances that we take advantage of today, enabling fast traveling news and information that can be seen and spread within seconds of an occurrence; the nineteenth century used more traditional means (such as newspapers, magazines, books, or word of mouth) to spread news and information from one person to another. Arguably, the two most influential sources of information during the times of the Civil War were written documents, like books, newspapers, or magazines. Two very important aspects that went into these written documents were poetry and photography. Both of which still play an immense role - even today - in the telling of the occurrences during the Civil War.

Regarding the photography produced during the war, Alexander Gardner took many photographs depicting scenes of the war that enabled the American population to see firsthand what exactly was going on, rather than reading about the depictions and stories told in the newspapers at that time. Not only were they informative, but they are also regarded “among the greatest war pictures ever taken and are also among the most prized records of American

history.” (Gardner, back cover) Gardner’s work will be the main topic of discussion for the photography section of this paper. As for poetry, the works of Herman Melville and Walt Whitman will be analyzed. These two poets are among the most profound and well-known writers of poetry who wrote during the Civil War.

The Civil War was the first war in the United States in which photography was extensively used as a means of documentation. It was not the first war fought on American ground to use the new technology of the time. In fact, there were three previous wars in which photography was used, but the significance and size of the Civil War is what brought its photography to light, and enabled photography to have the impact that it did. “Some historians even argue that we know more about the Civil War than any other war up to World War Two because of the vast amounts of photos left from the Civil War” (“The Impact of Civil War Photos on the Public.”) Visualization of the battles and their aftermaths allowed the American population to see with their own eyes exactly what was happening on American ground. It is one thing to hear a person talking about their seeing a pile of war-deteriorated bodies lying on the ground, but seeing a photograph displaying these graphic images without a doubt had a much greater influence on the viewer. As they say, a picture is worth a thousand words. “Verbal representations of such places, or scenes, may or may not have the merit of accuracy; but photographic presentments of them will be accepted by posterity with an undoubting faith.” (Gardner 8)

Alexander Gardner was born in Paisley Scotland in 1821. He would later move with his family to Glasgow Scotland where he would later purchase the Glasgow Sentinel, where he quickly turned the newspaper company into the second biggest newspaper in all of Glasgow. During and before this time, Gardner went on many trips to the United States with his brother

James, in order to establish a cooperative community. “Cooperatives are member-owned, member-governed businesses that operate for the benefit of their owners according to common principles agreed upon by the international cooperative community” (“What is a Co-op?”)

Gardner would make many trips to the United States, but one trip in particular would be responsible for peaking his interest in Photography. On this voyage in 1851, “Gardner paid a visit to the Great Exhibition in Hyde Park, New York, where he saw the photographs of Mathew Brady for the first time. Shortly afterward, Gardner began reviewing exhibitions of photographs in the Glasgow Sentinel, as well as experimenting with photography on his own” (“Alexander Gardner USA PHOTOGRAPHER.”) In 1856, Gardner would immigrate to the United States, and settle down in New York. There Gardner was hired by Mathew Brady to be a photographer. Gardner worked as a printmaker for photographs at first, but slowly moved up the ranks. Brady’s eyesight would soon begin to fail him, and in 1858 he put Gardner in charge of the whole gallery.

With the Civil war starting in 1861, the demand for soldiers to get their portrait taken before being sent off to war sky rocketed, and Gardner became one of the best most infamous photographers in this field. From witnessing himself the battle at Manassas in Virginia himself, Brady decided that would make a record of the Civil War through his photographers. He sent out twenty photographers throughout the United States to record and capture images of the war. Each photographer was given their own traveling dark room to develop the pictures on the spot. One of the lucky photographers given this task was of course, Alexander Gardner. “In November of 1861, Gardner was granted the rank of honorary Captain on the staff of General George McClellan. This put him in an excellent position to photograph the aftermath of America’s bloodiest day, the Battle of Antietam.” (“Alexander Gardner USA PHOTOGRAPHER.”) Two

days after the battle, Gardner became the very first out of the twenty photographers dispatched by Brady to capture photographs of dead soldiers on the Civil War battlefield. Gardner would later go on to take pictures of many more battles, such as: the siege of Petersburg, Fredericksburg, and Gettysburg ("Alexander Gardner USA PHOTOGRAPHER.") He was also able to take what is believed to be the very last photograph of Abraham Lincoln, just five days before his assassination. Not only that, he would also go on to take photographs of the people convicted of Lincoln's assassination, as well as their execution.

After the civil war, Mathew Brandy gave Gardner a gallery of his photographs located in Washington, DC. Gardner he would also appointed to be the official photographer of the Union Pacific Railroad, where he photographed building of a railroad in Kansas. In 1871, Gardner decided to end his photography career to open up an insurance company in Washington, DC. He would live out the rest of his life there in DC, passing away in 1882.

Although Gardner is perceived to be one of the best and most infamous photographers of his time, there are also many people who criticize his works for various reasons. Some of the photographs taken by Gardner caused a wide array of controversy.



[http://www.moma.org/wp/moma\\_learning/wp-content/uploads/2012/07/Alexander-Gardner.-Home-of-a-Rebel-](http://www.moma.org/wp/moma_learning/wp-content/uploads/2012/07/Alexander-Gardner.-Home-of-a-Rebel-)

The greatest controversy involves the moving of the objects being photographed to get an image that better appeals to the people (Sweet 107.) For example, take the picture depicted titled *Home of a Rebel Sharp Shooter* taken by Gardner, which focuses on one dead soldier after the Battle of Gettysburg. The reason why this

photograph was so controversial is because later researching and investigation of the photograph revealed that the scene had been staged. This was a practice done by many photographers and was not uncommon at the time. According to MoMA Learning, the body of the soldier was moved by Gardner along side the rocks, and his face was positioned to face the camera. Also, the rifle that is seen in the picture was not that of the soldier depicted, but rather it was a gun Gardner carried around himself.

To think of Gardner manipulating the bodies of the deceased and posing them into position for the perfect snapshot seems rather repulsive. But when taking into perspective the amount of time and effort that went into taking a photograph, with the limited technology available at the time, it makes sense. It seems very disingenuous to do such a thing, but taking photographs of he was was Gardner's career and it is obvious that he was willing to use some unorthodox methods to create the perfect picture. Also, take into consideration the vast numbers of people who died in the civil war (620,000 according to [civilwar.org](http://civilwar.org).) It makes sense how easily one could have been desensitized to the sight of death.

Despite the staging of some of his photographs, the impact that Gardner had on the people of his time, and the impact that still carries weight even today, is truly a great feat. "In order for Gardner to achieve his goal, he used advanced technology and artistry to make his images as realistic as possible in the hopes of showing Americans the true consequences of war. Those who saw the photos were met with an unfamiliar, harsh depiction of war that both intrigued and fascinated them; but to some, the photographs were too real and too painful." (Kostine 1) The photos enabled people to see the actual horrors of the Civil War. This was the first time in American history that this was possible. Rather than hearing about the depictions through word of mouth or from newspaper articles, the people who saw and still see these

photographs taken, can see first-hand exactly what things were like for soldiers and people affected by the war. It is estimated that Gardner took over twelve-hundred photographs depicting these scenes. (Kostine)

Just as photography was a prodigious aspect of the depiction of the American Civil war, another very popular form of depiction during that time which had an immense impact on the American population was poetry. Poetry enables mankind to embark on and explain some of its deepest and most profound experiences. It is through poetry, that we are able to express the emotions and thoughts regarding certain experiences or topics, where the writer is able to create a beautiful, personal and profound experience with the reader, expressing concepts in ways that normal writing simply cannot accomplish. Poetry was literally everywhere during the Civil War. It appeared in newspapers, books, magazines, periodicals, and so many other places as well. Ruth Graham stated that people were encountering poetry on a weekly, if not daily basis. She even goes on to say the notion that this war in particular was a “poetry-fuelled war.” She states that there are accounts of soldiers dying with poems in their hands, and vast amounts of poems written to political leaders, such as Abraham Lincoln, to back up her claim.

There are many poets during this time that dove into the popular topic of the Civil War, but Herman Melville and Walt Whitman are regarded as two of the most popular and talented poets of this time. Though their background stories and connections to the war are very different, they remain connected through the impact and skills presented in their poetry.

Herman Melville was born on August 1, 1819, to a once very wealthy family in New York. Having his father pass away at an early age, Melville attempted to financially support his family by working various jobs such as banking and also being a schoolteacher. But it was Whitman’s voyages as a seaman that sparked his interest in writing. On one particular voyage,

Melville was captured and held captive for several months by the Typees. Upon his return home, Melville's friends and family urged him to write down and record his experiences. This experience influenced Melville to write his very first successful piece of literature titled – *Typee: A Peep at Polynesian Life*. Soon after he had completed his life as a seaman, Melville became inspired to read extensively.

In 1847, Melville married Elizabeth Shaw and moved to New York. Shortly after he would move again to Berkshires. At Berkshires, he lived relatively close to the famous American novelist, Nathaniel Hawthorne. At this time, Melville wrote many different books. Some were a huge success, and others were not. His most notorious novel ever written was *Moby Dick*. Though this book is considered to be one of the greatest American novels, the book did not receive notoriety in Melville's lifetime. Soon after taking a trip to Europe, where he saw Hawthorne for the last time, Melville realized that his career as a novelist was over, and he took a job back in the states as a customs inspector. This is when Melville began to write his poetry. (“Herman Melville”)

To say that the Civil War had an impact on Melville's writing is a complete understatement. It soon became the key principal subject matter of Melville's poetry. He was so deeply connected to the war likely due to large amount of family members of his that were participants in the war. To depict his emotions and thoughts on the war, Melville wrote poems that would soon turn into two books: *Battle-Pieces and Aspects of the War*, published in 1866. Writing this book served as a sort of meditation for Melville. “The volume is regarded by many critics as a work as ambitious and rich as any of his novels. Unfortunately, Melville's remains relatively unrecognized as a poet.” (“Herman Melville”) Having written *Moby Dick* a novel considered to be a cannon in American Literature, it only makes sense that his poetry never



caught up to the hype. Though his poetry was produced with just as much skill and talent as his novels, he never seemed to be seen as a poet. People always knew him as a novelist.

Melville died of a heart attack in 1891 at the age of seventy-two. Whenever he passed away, he had been almost completely forgotten by the few fans he had in his lifetime. “During the week of his death, *The New York Times* wrote: ‘There has died and been buried in this city...a man who is so little known, even by name, to the generation now in the vigor of life that only one newspaper contained an obituary account of him, and this was but of three or four lines.’” (“Herman Melville”) It is incredibly ironic how nobody knew absolutely anything about him whenever he passed away, and how he would soon become one of the greatest American writers in history. It was not until the 1920’s that people began to recognize just how much talent Melville brought to the world of literature.

Melville took on a more political and philosophical approach to his Civil War poetry. “In *Battle-Pieces*, his astonishing political clairvoyance enables him to avoid both the mindless enthusiasm of the jingoists and ideologues (especially those on his own, abolitionist, side) and the cynicism of later revisionists.” (Turner) Turner also states that even before the war had begun, Melville recognized flaws that the framers of the American Constitution left for the succeeding generations to resolve. An excerpt from the poem “*The Conflict of Convictions*” depicts this idea:

Power unanointed may come-  
 Dominion (unsought by the free)  
 And the Iron Dome,  
 Stronger for stress and strain,  
 Fling her huge shadow athwart and main;

But the Founders' dream shall flee.

Turner explains that the iron dome represents the deafness of the American people when taking into consideration the acts of killing and violence in the war. The dome itself alludes to the iron dome build on top of the capital building after it had been rebuilt. The dome represents the blocking off of feelings and emotions whenever it comes to war. It represents the suppression of emotions and feeling regarding war. Turner says that it represents the ability for our armed forces to kill any man, if it means benefitting our country, and that the president backs this act as well, making it a very frightening idea to comprehend. In the last line quoted, Melville makes it clear that this type of thinking would have sent the founding fathers of the constitution's dream of our nation out the window.

Though Melville was very political in his approach to his Civil War poetry, this did not mean that he did not celebrate the end of the war. After the end of the war he produced the lines:

Hail to victory without the gaud  
 Of glory; zeal that needs no fans  
 Of banners; plain mechanic power  
 Plied congenitly in War now placed--  
 Where War belongs--  
 Among the trades and artisans.

Here we can clearly see that Melville is showing his appreciation for the end of the war. He indicates that the war is now where it belongs, in the past. Even though Melville had a very serious and philosophical nature to a lot of his poems, he was not completely dissolved in these kinds of matters. Though varying very differently in style and presentation from Melville, Walt Whitman is also regarded as one of the most well-known poetry writers of the Civil War.

Walt Whitman was born on May 31, 1819. He was the second son of Walter Whitman and Louisa Van Velsor. Walt Whitman grew up in Brooklyn as well as in Long Island. By the time Whitman turned twelve, he had begun to learn how to be a printer. This job enabled his love for literature. He became increasingly interested in the works of Homer, Dante, Shakespeare, as well as the Bible. After a fire in the printing district of New York City put Whitman out of a printing job, he began his school teaching career at the age of seventeen in 1836. Whitman taught until 1841, where he would then pursue being a full time journalist. He founded a newspaper titled the *Long-Islander* and would later go on to edit many more newspapers in the New York area. He would soon leave New York for New Orleans to become the editor of a newspaper called the *New Orleans Crescent*. During his times in the Deep South, this was when Whitman experienced the harsh realities of slavery though his witnessing of the slave markets in New Orleans. Whitman would then leave the South to head back to Brooklyn. Upon his return, he founded a “free soil” newspaper, called the *Brooklyn Freeman*. While publishing for this newspaper, Whitman also developed and refined his poetry skills. (“Walt Whitman”)

In 1855, Whitman published his first edition of *Leaves of Grass*, and released a second edition in 1856. Ralph Waldo Emerson notably praised his work, and Whitman even incorporated a letter from Emerson into the second edition of *Leaves of Grass*. Whitman would go on to produce many more volumes of his poetry book, as well as refine his poetic skills. Whenever the Civil War broke out, Whitman was working as a freelance journalist, while he was also helping out at a hospital in the New York area where he visited wounded soldiers. He would then move to Washington, D.C. to take care of his brother that had been wounded in the Civil War. He would then go on to put his journalism career on hold to work as a full time medic in the hospitals in D.C. for eleven years. After this, he took a job as a clerk for the Department of

the Interior, but ended up being fired because the Secretary of the Interior (James Harlan) found out that Whitman was the author of *Blades of Grass*, which he found to be offensive. (“Walt Whitman”)

Whitman struggled to support himself for most of his life. This was due to the fact that he was constantly sending money to his widowed mother, as well as his war-tattered brother. He also used much of his money to buy supplies for the wounded in the hospitals that he worked in. Whitman settled down in Camden, New Jersey where he had gone to visit his dying mother. Whitman soon would have a stroke that would disable him from being able to return back to Washington, D.C. With the help of the sales from his 1882 publication of *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman was able to buy a house in Camden. There he spent the declining years of his life, working on additions that would be his final poems. Whitman died on March 26, 1892.

Whitman’s approach in his poetry regarding the Civil War was clearly emotional in nature. Turner says that it was Whitman’s nature and habit to implement his feelings and emotions into his works. Turner states that at the beginning of the war, Melville is deeply moved and caught up in the public passion. This can be seen in Whitman’s introductory Civil War poem: “Beat! Beat! Drums!”

Beat! Beat! Drums! -Blow! Bugles! blow!  
 Through the windows-through doors-burst like a ruthless force,  
 Into the solemn church, and scatter the congregation;  
 Into the school where the scholar is studying;  
 Leave not the bridegroom quiet-no happiness must have now with his bride;  
 Nor the peaceful farmer any peace, plowing his field or gathering his grain  
 So fierce you whirr and pound, you drums-so shrill you bulges blow.

The tone in this particular poem is clearly ecstatic and energetic. This poem gives the reader a sense of emotion that Whitman is clearly caught up in the passion and propaganda of the war. In depicting the uprising of the instruments in the poem, and by including exclamation marks, it makes it hard for the reader to read this poem without having an upbeat tone.

This type of tone would then change whenever he finds out about his wounded brother. “There is no analysis: he responds richly and immediately to the anguish of the wounded, the pathetic male beauty of the young soldiers, the grand landscapes of the beloved broken America.” (Turner) Working with the wounded soldiers in the hospitals and finding out that his own brother had been wounded in the war must have hit home to Whitman. It is easy to see the tone changes in his poetry as the Civil War goes on. This can be seen in the poem presented:

A slight in camp in the day-break grey and dim,  
 As from my tent I emerge so early, sleepless,  
 As slow I walk in the cool fresh air, the path near by the hospital tent,  
 Three forms I see on stretchers lying, brought out there, untended lying,  
 Over each the blanket spread, ample brownish woolen blanket,  
 Grey and heavy blanket, folding, covering all.

Here we see Whitman walking out of the hospital at the beginning of dawn. He is sleepless, most likely from aiding the wounded soldiers in the hospital all night. As he walks out, he sees a stretcher just lying there that nobody was attending. He notices the blankets covering the whole person on the stretcher, indicating the covering of the deceased.

The tone of this poem is clearly very different from the first poem analyzed. We can see the way that Whitman’s perspective on the war has changed. At first, he was very energetic and excited about the war, but as he experiences first-hand the trials and tribulations that come with

war, his tone changes. One thing that he keeps constant however is that he always remains focused on feeling and emotions. Though those emotions do change, they never leave.

Whitman, unlike Melville, was well known during his times alive. But the both of them truly had a great impact and enable us today to be able to gain insight into the deeper meanings and feelings of the Civil War. They are regarded as two of the most important Civil War poets, and they are revered as such with correct and accurate cause.

Whether it be the photographic depictions of Gardner, the metaphorical ingeniousness of Melville, or the emotionally driven poetry of Whitman, all three of these people have deeply added to the way we know the Civil War today. It is through the works of these men that we know as much about the war that we do. Newspaper articles can give you the facts, but they cannot portray the feelings or emotions that poetry can convey. Nor can they as accurately describe the depictions of a war-torn battlefield like photography can. It is through the works of these men, and many more like them that have given people for many generations and many generations to come a true depiction of what times were like during the American Civil War.

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